

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP)
December 16, 1995
Belfast

Participants: Gary McMichael and Gary Matthews

Summary

Representatives of the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) said no decommissioning prior to talks is possible because of distrust between paramilitaries; all parties should talk to build trust but we will not talk with Sinn Fein in isolation because we don't believe Sinn Fein's bona fides; the loyalist paramilitaries are purely defensive in nature, born in the security vacuum created by the failure of the British authorities to eradicate the terrorist menace threatening unionist communities; they will not decommission one weapon until the IRA has completely disarmed; that is the position now, but it is impossible to predict what the position of the paramilitaries will be six or twelve months from now; the UDP has twice discussed the modalities of decommissioning with the British, but not in any detail and has never discussed modalities with the PUP; and punishment beatings are horrific but they are a fact of life unrelated to the decommissioning issue.

End Summary

Account of Meeting

McMichael said all we say is confidential. We will not go to the press. Loyalists take a pragmatic approach. The issue of arms is elevated beyond necessity in the peace process. We recognize that the issue of illegally held arms has to be dealt with but not as a precondition. Dialogue is the only way to build trust but unfortunately it has not worked out that way yet. The elevation of the arms issue is in part mischievous, in part due to the naivete of the government in its search for the achievable, in part reflecting the desire of some politicians to humiliate the paramilitaries on both sides of the sectarian divide. The attitude of the so-called constitutional parties, setting themselves above the parties close to the paramilitaries, is not the way to build an honest open process. A handover of weapons prior to talks is impossible because of distrust between the paramilitaries and fear within the communities. It is highly unreasonable to expect the loyalists to hand in weapons while a high degree of uncertainty about a return to violence by the IRA and others prevails. Trust, bona fides have to be established among those who represent the paramilitaries politically so that no guns are perceived to be held at the others' heads. Our paramilitaries are ready to enter the democratic process, even if the results of that process do not coincide with their political objectives.

Commitment to the principle of consent is important. Sinn Fein/IRA is the only political party in the UK that does not recognize Northern Ireland as part of the UK: self-determination for SF/IRA is that of the people of the island of Ireland. Until Sinn Fein/IRA can accept the principle of consent for the people of Northern Ireland, too many questions are left unanswered about their willingness to accept the outcome of a democratic process if that outcome is not consonant with their goals.

We have a mandate to meet with the International Body today. The future depends on the analysis we present to the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC), specifically the UDA/UFF that we are politically close to. Our submission to the IB is as full as the short time permitted. The permanence of the ceasefire depends on the IRA. The CLMC will not strike unless struck. In my view, the UDA does not want to keep weapons for their own sake. Decommissioning is not the most difficult issue to be

confronted. In a climate of trust, the technical details of a turnover of weapons would be worked out quickly. We believe all parties have to engage, but because we have no faith in Sinn Fein's bona fides, we will not conduct a dialogue with the republicans in isolation. The loyalist paramilitaries exist because, unlike in any other country faced with a terrorist insurrection, the British have failed to eradicate the IRA. Loyalist paramilitaries were born in that vacuum to defend a community under attack. The British have abdicated their responsibility and consistently sought to create a political environment against the wishes of the people. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 giving the Republic of Ireland a consultative role in Northern Ireland affairs was drawn up with the SDLP, without any consultation with the unionist parties. National UK parties are not represented in Northern Ireland; the citizens of Northern Ireland are not accorded equal treatment within the UK.

The modalities of decommissioning have come up at least twice in discussions with the British government but not in any detail. That is seen as a hypothetical issue at this point, but we'd be willing to discuss more thoroughly at some stage. We have not discussed the issue with the PUP. At this moment in time, the loyalist paramilitaries are unable to decommission weapons (a tactical decommissioning is unacceptable) while still in the atmosphere of a continued IRA threat. It's not possession but intent that is important in relation to weapons.

Matthews said the loyalist paramilitaries are purely defensive organizations. There is no possibility of decommissioning of loyalist weapons until the IRA has fully decommissioned its weapons.

We don't care whether the IRA holds on to its weapons, McMichael continued, as long as it doesn't use them. With respect to the possibility of a parallel process of decommissioning, if decommissioning is begun, it should have a snowball effect, on the argument that if one turns in some weapons, why not turn them all in?

This is the position of the loyalist paramilitaries now. We cannot predict what the position of these organizations will be six to twelve months from now. The concept of gestures has no importance to loyalist organizations. Gestures are cosmetic. It's better to have a commitment not to use than 5% of the weapons stock still outstanding and no such commitment not to use. It's questionable whether a complex issue such as decommissioning can be dealt with in such a short time. The issue did not evolve naturally. People in the community fear the paramilitaries. They have every reason to be fearful. The issue of decommissioning is a manifestation of fear. Political parties must recognize that what is desirable is not always achievable. There cannot be a handover of weapons before talks, but that may not be the position forever.

Matthews noted that the Official IRA never handed in a weapon when it stood down. A weapons handover simply has no precedent.

Asking for something that cannot be delivered such as a weapons handover by the IRA as a precondition to talks is dangerous. Punishment beatings are horrific but unrelated to the decommissioning issue. They are a fact of life on both sides of the conflict. The police, preoccupied with anti-terrorist responsibilities, are not seen in working class areas and are not engaged in normal police activities, creating a vacuum filled by the paramilitaries. The CLMC itself has appealed for an end to the punishment beatings, but they go on. If someone approaches the paramilitaries to seek justice for a crime committed in the community, the paramilitaries cannot ignore such requests for assistance. A high proportion of beatings in loyalist areas are the product of internal discipline, while in nationalist areas problems such as joyriding are more likely to provoke punishment beatings.

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